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Construction's Man of the Year

Secretary John Volpe forges comprehensive transportation policy

In only his first year in office, John A. Volpe has grabbed the youthful Department of Transportation by the scruff of the neck, given it a sound shaking and sent it running toward a genuine national policy.

He has pushed nearly to approval the first long-range programs to help cities develop or revive mass transit and enable airports to catch up with the jumbojet age.

He has established safety and environmental protection as primary considerations in all transportation planning.

He cut through the District of Columbia transit-freeway dispute and got work started on the Washington-area rail system, using it to win higher White House priority for urban problems across the country.

He is the first to admit that much of his success is because changing public attitudes make the time ripe. But this success also reflects the political acumen of the former contractor and public works official who won the Massachusetts governorship on his first try for elective office in 1960. As secretary, he has transformed DOT from an obscure bureaucracy into a consumer oriented agency.

Volpe brought more solid background to his post than most Cabinet officers. A building contractor off and on for 30 years, he was Massachusetts commissioner of public works for over three years, starting in 1953. In 1956, he became first federal highway administrator, on an interim basis, and helped set up the Interstate system. When first elected governor in '60, he was president of the Associated General Contractors of America.

"He's skillful and tenacious in getting his way within the Administration," says Sen. Harrison Williams (D-N.J.), who worked out a tough financing compromise on the public transportation bill with Volpe. He's

also called an effective advocate before Congress.

Getting the votes. Democratic administrations for years have been trying to get their own majority in Congress to provide more transit and airport money. Volpe's transit program whisked through the Senate last week by a vote of 83 to 4 (see p. 9). Last November the House passed the airport/airways measure by what Volpe called an unbelievable majority of 337 to 6, and the Senate will take it up soon (p. 10).

Volpe still has to put across his 20-year master plan, expected to go to the White House within a few weeks. "But he's already made the breakthrough," says Massachusetts Institute of Technology Prof. Charles Miller, who headed a pre-inauguration transportation task force for President Nixon and now runs MIT's urban systems lab. "We're dealing with all social problems as a group, but you can't talk about balanced transportation or coordinating transportation with urban development until you have the financing. He's done the hard work of getting whole new programs. Their long-term effects will be greater than any general policy decisions."

While determined to get immediate improvements out of the study and research stage, Volpe looks far into the future. His national plan will probably propose a general trust fund to give all transportation the flexibility and long-range planning the highway program enjoys. He insists that principal users or other beneficiaries should support individual programs.

The first policy planning phase will be comparing "the effectiveness and responsiveness of transportation alternatives on a national basis," says Volpe. Phase two, planning and programming, will match resources to needs and set priorities. "The new and key element here," he says, "is that decisions to build are made at the local levels where the need exists. In addition to making state decisions, governors will serve as channels for the decisions of mayors and other local officials."

"In sum, we are moving for the first time to a systems approach," says Volpe. "DOT's role will be that of a catalytic agent. And this is the precise purpose for which our department was created."

But DOT's report will probably stress regulatory reform at least as much as federal spending priorities.

Top department officials think regulation is bogged down in legalism and is more responsive to the economic conditions of 100 years ago than today. Since DOT has no authority over regulatory agencies, it will press gradual changes by appearing as a party representing the public in proceedings.

The entire national policy will require skilled representation. In that, Volpe's toughening as a Republican jousting in a Democratic state will come to the fore.

Political instinct

Volpe will always compromise, say his friends, on everything but principle.

And he's ruffled a few leathers by being unbending. His greatest political trial started in 1964 when he was attempting a comeback, having been turned out of the statehouse in '62 after a single two-year term. Polls gave his opponent, Lt. Gov. Francis Bellotti, a slight edge and the competition for votes was fierce.

Volpe assembled his aides to prepare for a debate with Bellotti and stunned them by saying he would come out for a sales tax. "We thought the mental strain had been too much," recalls one. In a state with no broad-based tax, his staff argued, the move was political suicide. "I've thought about it and we need it," said Volpe.

In a televised confrontation two weeks before balloting, Volpe caught his opponent off guard with the proposal. Then he took his case to the people, "crisscrossing the state so fast he seemed to be in two places at once," said one observer. He won by 23,000 votes out of about 2.5 million cast. It wasn't as big as his 1960 victory, but he swung over 1 million votes from the landslide tallies for Democratic ticket leaders, President Lyndon Johnson and Sen. Edward Kennedy.

Then he fought the traditional two-to-one Democratic majority in the legislature for 14 months to get his program, finally going back to the people to win support. At one point during the

skirmishing, an aide suggested pulling back and using the legislature's resistance as an issue in the next campaign. Volpe's reply was: "Look, don't talk politics to me. This state is going to die if we don't get financial relief. I don't care if I don't get re-elected. The state must be made financially solvent."

Volpe argued that finding the right course and pursuing it turns out to be good politics. "He gave me a good licking on that," says his chief foe in the battle, Senate President Maurice Donahue.

In the '66 election, which pitted him against state Attorney General Edward McCormack (nephew of the House speaker) for a newly instituted four-year term, Volpe ran on his sales tax and the development it had brought. He won by the biggest margin in 20 years, 500,000 votes, and was the first Republican to take Boston since 1920.

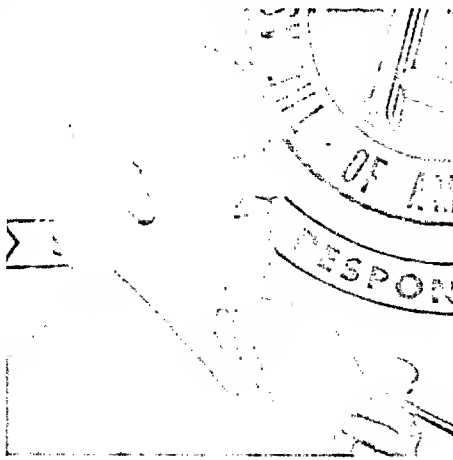
The victory catapulted Volpe into the national spotlight. When Richard Nixon listed possible vice presidential candidates, Volpe was near the top and came within a hair of getting the nod.

Order and progress. Instead, he was called to the Cabinet. There was glee among most highway officials. Volpe was one of them, they thought. He had run Massachusetts' highway program and helped set up the Interstate program. As governor, he was one of the first to oppose some of the so-called humanizing federal provisions, such as requirements for dual public hearings on location and design because they delayed highway construction.

Harvard economist and former ambassador to India, John Kenneth Galbraith, called him "a most compulsive roadbuilder," and warned, "If we don't keep an eye on him in Washington, he'll cover the country with concrete."

But critics overlooked Volpe's record at home. Before taking office, he was already talking about balanced transportation. "There are so many vehicles being brought into the center of many cities," he said, "it's impossible even to provide parking spaces for them without tearing down half the city."

His initial problem, though, was taking firm possession of the two-year-old Department of Transportation. It comprised a number of nearly independent agencies: the Federal Highway Administration with a \$5-billion-per-year operation, the Federal Aviation Administration with over 50,000 employees (more than half the department's total) and lesser organizations. Coordination was negligible. Volpe called for a list of all research projects and programs, and



Contractor, public works official . . .

Associated General Contractors president Volpe was state public works chief, federal highway administrator.



Governor of Massachusetts . . .

Elected in 1960, Volpe lost two years later but came back in '64, serving until Nixon called him to Washington.

a good deal longer to get than I as a businessman cared to wait," he recalls.

Volpe at once delegated responsibility to accelerate activity, coordinated work through his close aides, and increased his personal control of individual agencies. In promoting public transportation, he boasted recently, "I have Federal Highway Administrator Frank Turner talking out for mass transit, and Urban Mass Transit Administrator Carlos Villarreal backing express bus lanes. We've got 'em working together."

The changes at DOT focus on the assistant secretary for environment and urban systems, a new post proposed by the Miller task force and held by one of its members, former Seattle Mayor James Braman. His office reviews every project that goes through the department. If he cannot reach agreement with an agency director, the project goes to Volpe's desk. Braman was instrumental in the decision to divert an Interstate route from New Orleans' French Quarter and more recently halting development of a jetport in the Everglades and saving a historic park area in San Antonio from a freeway.

Volpe did inherit some well formed ideas and well staffed operations from the first secretary, Alan Boyd, a lawyer with regulatory experience. Boyd assembled the department, no mean task in itself. He also put special interest groups on notice that they couldn't keep calling the tune in their own bailiwicks and he brought public attention to the imbalance in public spending.

"We tried to make the picture complete, but we couldn't," says Volpe.

mer Urban Mass Transit Administrator Paul Sitton. Volpe developed, refined and pushed the ideas through. Says Sitton, who stayed on briefly under Volpe, "Alan was sympathetic to politics, but he didn't react realistically. Volpe has great political instinct."

To the marketplace

Volpe's instinct produced a consumer appeal in transportation. "He led the White House in this," says an aide. "Volpe discovered the appeal of the environment issue before Nixon did." He talks of the degradation of air caused by automobiles, the intolerable congestion in cities.

Volpe designed his public transportation bill for public appeal, and to captivate a broad range of congressmen. He's built in an emphasis on buses because they fit metropolitan highway systems and serve smaller cities as well. Of earlier efforts he says, "They tried to sell it as a mass transit bill, which means a big city bill, and lost a lot of support. We've shown where cities of 50,000 to 75,000 need it; we've shown clients of failing bus companies they need it."

Volpe saves his trumps for Capitol Hill. "Most Cabinet officers have only two or three committees to work with," he says. "I have seven plus subcommittees." Even so, he impresses congressmen with his command of every subject, almost never turning to an aide for help.

He prepares for long testimony the same way he did for TV debates when he was running for governor, says Barry Locke, a top Volpe aide for about six



Transportation Secretary . . .

He pledged to lead the department to a comprehensive policy, insisting on high priority for urban congestion.

years. "He goes into isolation and studies maybe half the night. He remembers everything. His mind catalogs it and he never forgets."

When Volpe goes up to the Hill he has a lead, a lot of friends on both sides of the aisle. Rep. Harley Staggers (D-W. Va.) says Volpe had a favorable headstart with his Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee because of previous appearances. "We often invited governors to testify. Not many bothered, but Volpe always did," he recalls. Many also remember Volpe from his days as highway administrator. "It's made it easier," says Volpe. "They know I play it down the middle."

Non-stop leader. Sheer drive has been Volpe's style since he started hustling soft drinks to a road crew at age 12. "He's friendly and a good fellow, but not convivial," says G. Joseph Tauro, long-time friend and Chief Justice of the Superior Court in Boston. "He's not the kind to join in and have a few drinks. He will have one, maybe a beer, maybe half a glass of beer."

Volpe's name almost never shows up in the social columns. He refuses about 50 social invitations a week and only dines occasionally with a few close friends with whom he discusses politics or transportation. He's a sports fan and catches a game on television now and then.

Otherwise, it's work, seven days a week. He holds to a rigorous routine, exercise regimen, strict diet (extremely plain and nearly cholesterol free) and has hardly missed mass a single day in 30 years.

Volpe rises at 6:30. After working out

on an exercise cycle (he jogs when he can) comes a whirlpool bath and fierce towel massage, then a breakfast of fruit juices, honey and black coffee, and he's off, often not stopping until after midnight. He may deliver speeches in several cities across the country in a day. His record for luncheon appearances is five in one day. When Volpe gets on a plane, he never reads a magazine. Instead, work comes out of his briefcase. In his limousine, he switches on a special light and does more work. When he leaves his office for home, no matter what the hour, he takes at least two stuffed briefcases.

On a week-long vacation in the Virgin Islands in December, his staff sent him a full briefcase everyday. They sent him one to go through on the flight back and when his plane landed in Baltimore, there was another waiting for him.

Several close aides who have been with Volpe, who's 61, for over five years are still in their 30's. "You have to be young to keep up with him. I'm 38 and he tires me out," says Locke. "You don't work for John Volpe unless you're willing to commit yourself and work 24 hours a day. He keeps you going all day then calls you at midnight to talk about a new idea or a report he's reading."

Up from hod carrier. Volpe learned early that diligence pays off. At the age of 19 he quit his father's plastering trade and worked his way through an architectural engineering course at Wentworth Institute, in Boston (failure of his father's company having wiped out his dream of an MIT engineering degree). Two years out of school, he was superintendent of a contracting company. In 1933 he launched his own company and submitted a number of second-low bids while drawing \$15 a week in pay. He finally landed a job by a \$13 margin, a \$1,285 boiler room addition in Lynn, Mass. When Volpe entered public life 20 years later, he was a millionaire, even though he closed down the company during the war and took a commission in the Navy's Civil Engineer Corps.

Volpe's background as a contractor and public works official made a tempting target. When he was public works commissioner, a development firm offered to pay for interchange ramps serving one of its projects. Volpe directed that the state pay the entire cost. Later, his construction company got a contract from the same firm for a shopping center. During the 1960 gubernatorial campaign, Volpe's oppo-

nents charged that it was a sweetheart contract. They hadn't done their homework.

When it became obvious that the interchange area would boom, the development firm withdrew its offer. After the state completed the ramps, more than 40 companies moved in, bringing almost 7,000 jobs. As to the shopping center, Volpe's company was the lowest of three bidders. When one of the lawyers who had brought the charges heard that, he apologized. Volpe won by 138,000 votes as favorite son John F. Kennedy swept the presidential vote.

The American dream

That didn't surprise those who know how John Volpe does business. When he first became involved in politics, in 1948, he voluntarily stopped bidding on state and county work in Massachusetts.

When he was elected governor, his firm wouldn't take municipal work in the state, even though there was then no conflict of interest law. Later, when he went to Washington, the company quit competing for federal contracts and Volpe sold his interest for \$1 million, reportedly suffering a tax bite of about \$250,000. "He must have lost a fortune," says Tauro.

As counsel to the company for about 30 years, he recalls, "I can count on less than the fingers of one hand the instances in which we were involved in litigation," says Tauro. "He's almost an enigma in the industry." Volpe never looked for extras and he never put the squeeze on subs. "Those were his orders."

As governor, says Tauro, "He was very tough on everyone. You weren't his friend if you asked him to deviate one iota from the straight and narrow." One of his first actions was going after the pervasive corruption in the state.

Volpe's greatest enthusiasm, though, was always for economic development and social programs, particularly education. "He really believes in the American dream," says Joseph L. Tauro, who replaced his father as \$1-per-year general counsel to the governor. "He thinks that if you help a man get up on the first rung, maybe the second, then with a little elbow grease he can make it just like Volpe did."

He early focused on transportation, pointing out that it doesn't do any good to expand employment if there's no public transit to get to the jobs. "If we can lick this transportation mess, we've solved a lot of social problems," says Volpe.

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